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Three Hundredth Anniversary
of Shakespeare's Birth

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The Three Hundredth Anniversary of Shakespeare's Birth.

A PRIZE POEM

RECITED IN

THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

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BY

WILLIAM JOHN COURTHOPE,
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ARGUMENT.

THE bells of Stratford are ringing. A vision of Poets rises, who bow down to Shakespeare. The cause of their homage is shewn thus :—A state of early childhood is represented, free from self-consciousness, interpreting Nature unwittingly, and recognising the multiformity of man. A second state is represented in manhood, which, having lost sight of the truths of nature, shrinks into itself, and reduces all things to its own standard. The Poets fill the void with imaginary creations. Shakespeare the greatest poetical creator. Shakespeare's life in Stratford. The still life of his brain. The *dramatis personæ* of his imagination are embodied, and vivified on the stage. The Comedy—the Tragi-Comedy—the Tragedy—and the effect produced by each on the spectators. A vision of Shakespeare sending his Characters into the world. The Characters recover for the mind its lost sympathy. The vision fades, and the poem ends.

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"THE purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first, and now, was, and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to shew Virtue her own feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

Hamlet, act iii. scene 2.

THE THREE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTH.

CLASH out, you loud and jubilant towers, ring down
Clear peals of merriment from Stratford town. The Bells of Stratford.
Here, while the shepherd, o'er the silvered fells,
Leads up his revelry of dancing bells,
While virginal springtide her full censer drops
By hedge, and pool, and perfumed hazel copse,
Low rings the river, rings the sedgy strand,
And Avon banks are blithe as Fairyland.

By dawn in these green lands my wondering eyes
Awoke in a dream-peopled Paradise, A Vision of Poets.
I heard low music moving in the dells,
Melodious rhymes, clear-parted syllables;

Then, sudden, on a knoll advantaged fair,
With greener grass and more pellucid air,
Palm-crowned, with white robes glistening in the sun,
Uprose the Island Poets, one by one:
With Dryden, Keats; in delicate attire
Blind Milton, touched with more celestial fire;
And mild chivalric Spenser, singing low
Of Britomart in arms, and Una pure as snow.

Who bow down to Shakespeare.

Still as I gazed, methought the gentle crowd
Their fair white foreheads reverently bowed;
While, like in mien, but taller by the span,
Moved in the midst a noble Englishman.
Broad was the brow, beneath whose marble height
Shone the mild eyes, untroubled, large, and bright.
High o'er the band he passed. Anon I viewed
Around his steps a medley multitude:
Light elfin shapes were these, instinct with breath—
Falstaff, Saint Isabel, and 'black Macbeth,'
And minds as various as the wide world rules,
Kings, scholars, clowns, philosophers, and fools.
Uprose the Poets with fine linen stirs,
Soft fell their feet like chimes of grasshoppers,
While, clustering round their king, they seemed to pass,
Like tall white snowdrops on the shining grass.

The subject of the Poem.

Lord of the happy souls that wandered free
In art, or song, or mild philosophy,

Why do our hearts in vestal pure desire
Thus feed thine altar with perennial fire?
Thou art for ever! In the street at noon
Thy voice, low-breathed like some melodious tune,
Streams o'er us, and when Hesperus is pale,
Sings like the clear leaf-folded nightingale,
And white-stoled wandering spirits steal us hence
To memoried haunts of elder innocence.
What wakes the bells, and why thy peers bowed down,
The fair white forehead and the palmy crown,
This claims my song; my double theme shall be,
The captive World, the Poets' victory.

The freedom of childhood.

See the first breath of nature undefiled,
Fresh from God's gardens, see the little child.
How boundless are his paths! he slumbers, curled
Upon the soft deep bosom of the world,
Or lives in happy tales, or roams at ease
Through temples, halls, and sunny palaces;
Wide air, blue seas, and violet-painted sod,
Warm with the fragrance of indwelling God.
Men to his fancy seem as rain-drops pearled
On winter branches, each a various world;
This clear with art, this excellently bright
With wit more subtle, this with lovelier light:
What joy to mark their moods! what pain to espy
Each rare effulgence shiver, shrink, and die!

The narrow sphere of the man's mental life.

Not thus the man. The vision, less and less,
Like frosty fabrics, melts to nothingness.
Though Nature's voice be tuneable and strong,
Custom can steal the music from her song.
The child, informed with some sweet subtle spell,
All hearts frequented, light as Ariel.
The man to knowledge, reason, doubt confined,
Transforms to Protean self all human kind.
Or if he strive his neighbour's soul to mark,
And find his springs of being, all is dark;
At last, o'ergrown with usage, lust, and pelf,
God and mankind he measures by himself.
Sooth, 'tis a cloistered nun, by bolt and bars
Shut from all nature save the nightly stars,
Betimes she hears the murmurs of the morn,
Glad scythe, or shepherd's call, or liquid horn;
Blue looks the sky, soft summer warms the wold,
But four bare walls her liberties withhold,
These four bare walls, until the grey life ends,
Her gaolers, books, philosophers, and friends.

The work of the Poets.

So, like the sleeping Maid, a hundred years
The world is prisoned,—then the Prince appears.
For when the poets' eyes grow clear to see
That death-cold life, that tranced virginity,
Soft pity fills their soul, and feigning thus
Unhappy Dido, or blind Œdipus,

They, with the warm breath of their passioned dreams,
Imprint the kiss, and thaw the frozen streams.

Then clash, blithe bells of Stratford! bud and spray,
Burst into life, and keep high holiday!
Sing, woodland songsters, stretch your sweet brown throats.
And throng the air with more melodious notes,
Till Nature, resonant, swell the song supreme:
Song must be deep as life if Shakespeare be the theme.
The grey, snow-fingered centuries since his birth
Have thrice with silver touched the hoary earth;
And oft I wander where the chancelled bands
Lift their stone faces, and their folded hands.
And lie beneath the windy bells, and keep
A wakeless ward amid the eternal sleep;
Then, o'er this world of silence, seems to rise
The marble brow, the mild and speaking eyes,
A form expressed with life as fair and free,
As once Leontes found in warm Hermione.
Once, where his sculptured marble rules a room
Filled with old books, and cedar-sweet perfume,
I saw by dusk his children, banded white,
As star by star encrowns the argent night.
One side, poor slighted Helen seemed to stand,
Meek-eyed, abashed; against her, Ferdinand,
His lips on maid Miranda's; and between,
Blood on her hand, the pale, sleep-burdened queen.

The greatest poetical creator.

Ah! what soft voices thronged the sacred shelf,
"Child, in God's various children, know thyself!"

Shakespeare in Stratford.

Stand here on Avon's banks. How peaceful seems
The watery palace where the Father dreams!
Woods, flowers, and birds are all one blended chime,
Breathed from the Elysium of departed Time.
Here, in close bonds, the peasant kindred spent
Mild days of gentle toil improvident;
He, in the midst, as on his woodland way
The traveller wonders what the wild birds say,
Marked all their sports, and read with deeper sight
Each keen impulsive grief, or new delight.
For oft at Easter, with gay baubles piled,
The pedlar's pack the country choughs beguiled[a];
The grace his bargain lacked his tongue supplied:
Fine Barbary laces travelled from Cheapside,
Pale Baltic amber, Flemish lace had he,
And Cyprus lawns that never crossed the sea.
The elders, 'neath the swinging ale-house sign,
Leaned on their staves, and babbled in the shine,
Big with the world's declension, pleased once more
To hear the slanderous tale, thrice-told before—
The thrice-told tale still claimed the expected start,
And lifted palms confessed the virtuous heart.

[a] Winter's Tale, act iv. scene 3.

Soon in the midst his rein the carrier drew[b],
Then the gold ale was fetched, and what was new
The idlers asked, what brought him posting down,
And how the great world wagged, and London town.
He, much adventuring to the bowshot bold,
Of Queen, and Spaniard, and gay pageant told,
Drank inspiration from their dumb delight,
And winged with every shaft a longer flight.
The Master marked, and smiled. Each peaceful sound
Seemed a far echo from Life's deep profound.
But when the dewy eve descended slow,
Soft as a cloak, what joy by Avon's flow,
To find, amid the meadows silvered white,
The happy peoples of the dim twilight.
With looms quick moving in the golden furze,
Low laughed the elves from shining gossamers;
Soft woodland tribes, that in the gnarlèd root
Had couched all day, or in the reddening fruit
Pavilioned,—forth they came, and like a star,
Wound through the dewy bells Mab's merry midnight car[c].

So, born of Life and Thought, a countless train
Came from the dark, and thronged his silent brain;
Mute forms, like Banquo's children, one by one;
These lapped in laughter, dreaming in the sun,

'Αφροδίτη ἀναδυομένη.

[b] Henry IV., act ii. scene 1.

[c] Romeo and Juliet, act i. scene 4: "O then, I see, Queen Mab has been with you," &c.

These wavering piteous in a wildered woe,
Wan, trembling ghosts on wastes of trackless snow.
To warm, still life the coloured Image grew,
Soft as the Paphian, from profoundest blue
Emerging: first she seemed an aureole mist,
In halls of amber and deep amethyst;
Then gleamed the snowy limbs, and floating woof
Of glossy gold, beneath the crystal roof;
Last, her white shoulders pearled with netted sheen,
Dropt in big dews,—the Acidalian queen.

The Stage.

Soon, in this mimic world, well-ordering Art
To every shadow dealt his various part.
The task begins. Upon my dreamless eyes
The stage is phantomed, and the curtains rise;
Where yon broad beech and glistening Maybud blows,
I see white faces mount in circling rows;
With windy sobs the green arena heaves,
And countless laughter thrills the waving leaves;
While, quick as April, shifts the motley play,
Wise fool, or crownless king, or mad Midsummer fay.

The Comedy.

First, o'er the stage light Laughter moves in glee;
Lord of the ungovernable elves is he,
Which in a blind perplexity of ways,
With fitful lights, poor mortal souls bemaze:
Prone, as their momentary humours please,
Old sober Order from sound sense to tease;

Mismate strange pairs, true-lovers' knots undo,
And piece in frolic phantasies anew.
Orsino sighs, and Viola must go,
To win by love the warrant for her woe,
And melt to her sweet self Olivia's virgin snow.
Benedick the bachelor perforce must mate;
And wayward Katharine kneels obedient Kate[d];
And she, who mirrored Beauty like a glass,
Titania, lies enamoured of an ass.
O happy Laughter, like the streams that feed, Its effect on the mind.
Unseen, but coolly felt, the thirsty mead;
So o'er the dull, parched heart, thy sunny springs
Steal from their wells, in mazy wanderings,
Joy-bearing, fresh, till all the barren ground
Smiles, with white Love and pure Compassion crowned.

As in a burning palace flames are blown The Tragi-Comedy.
Round some vast statue, based on stirless stone,
By each prevailing wind the fires are bowed,
Now weakly wavering, now like thunder loud,
Dark stands the stone immovable; and so
Stands o'er his lustful city—Angelo.
How grave the Law! how feeble Mercy's cry!
If sin be death, then Claudio must die.

[d] *Petruchio.*—"Good-morrow, Kate; for that's your name, I hear.
Katharine.—"Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing:
They call me—Katharine, that do talk of me."
Taming of the Shrew, act ii. scene 1.

And yet—so pure she is, she pleads so well,
His face grows soft, for oh, maid Isabel,
Fenced fast in pride, or steeled in triple will[e],
Man must be man, and nature frailty still;
Soft pleasures, light unchasteness never stole
To the warm fountains of his frozen soul;
But this rare angel, this secluded worth,
Pure as God's snow, soft floating to the earth,
Heaven's vestal vowed, and yet so human all—
'Tis Virtue, tempting Virtue to her fall[f].

Its humanizing power.

See as they gaze, half pity and half fears,
A thousand eyes grow wet with human tears.
And each seems whispering, "Shall this sinful breath,
In threescore years predestinate to death,
This inly wavering, fierce, yet feeble flame,
Ape God's just voice, and damn my neighbour's shame?
God weighs the eternal scales. Live, Claudio, live;
As my soul prays for pardon, I forgive."

The Tragedy

O for some philtre poppy-drowsed, to steep
The languid lids, and make her durance deep,
Sleep, sleep, and wake not, Desdemona, sleep.
How pure, how soft, how beautiful she seems,
A world of love, an innocence of dreams!

[e] *Angelo.*—"Look, what I will not, that I cannot do."
Measure for Measure, act ii. scene 2.

[f] *Angelo.*—"O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint,
With saints doth bait thy hook."
Measure for Measure, act ii. scene 2.

'Tis Venice ; in the long sweet summer eves
Othello comes, and she, so stealthy, leaves
"The house affairs," to woo the old old tales
Of sunny lands, strange men, and fair full-flowing sails.

God ! o'er this Paradise, how stony still
Stands the dark shadow of misfeatured ill !
Heaven shrive her soul. Yet make thy purpose sure[g].
Is she not lovely ? meek ? and passing pure ?
Her vestal breath, as soft as swallow's wing,
Scarce parts the night with gentle winnowing ;
Dark eyelid eaves, loose slips of golden hair,
She seems a breathing stone, or cloistress lost in prayer.
This sleeping world, the moulded frame divine,
Eyes, breath, and heart,—Othello, all were thine.
Then must this perfumed censer of delight
Die, like a candle's spark, amid the vasty night ?

Pity and terror.

Hark ! from the benches sobs the stifled moan ;
Hearts freeze, brains madden, eyes grow stark as stone.
Now farewell, sweet ! An agony of bliss
Brands on her lips the last, the deadly kiss ;—
She wakes. Love fills her eyes. Ah, piteous ! Fall,
Fall, just avenging heavens, crash down, and shatter all.

A vision of Shakespeare sending

The green stage fades, the mighty Master stands,
His eyes suffused with heaven ; still spirit bands

[g] *Othello.*—"It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause," &c.
Othello, act v. scene 2.

his Characters into the world.

Come treading to a music soft and low,
With murmured love; he, mild as Prospero,
Sends them all forth, with spells of moving tales,
Free as the dead Greek's deathless nightingales [h].

The Characters perform their task.

Come forth, white bands. Eve from her deep retreat
Steals up the world with cool, dew-dropping feet:
The green-leaf palace 'neath her sober wing
Grows purple-dark. Sweet elfin children, sing.
Lift up your urns, and pour soft streams and slow,
Love, laughter, grief, in one commingled flow.
Come with thy flowers, child Perdita; and thou,
Whose lonely eyes, and pale bereavèd brow
Proclaim thee, Constance. Thou, in whose sweet school,
Orlando's lips were taught to love by rule,
Come with thy crook, and on the carven rind
Spell out the fresh love-letters, 'Rosalind,'
Or, if the time would rather, meek-eyed Grief
Unseal thy springs, and give pent tears relief.
O rarest Viola, strong with speechless eye
To watch thine unsunned love too slowly die,—
Love shall not die! And, ah! how dark the glen!
How lonely thou! my poor, pale Imogen.
That was Ophelia's song. Down, Lear, and rest
Thy storm-blanched cheek on thy dead daughter's breast.

[h] αἱ δὲ τεαὶ ζώουσιν ἀηδόνες, ἤσιν ὁ πάντων
ἁρπακτὴρ Ἀΐδης οὐκ ἐπὶ χεῖρα βαλεῖ.
Callimachus' Elegy on Heracleitus.

The babbling lips grow soft in sleep,—lie here,
White hairs and gold, one life, one love, one bier.

So dreams my heart, 'neath shadow-haunted eaves,
And still their white robes glisten through the leaves,
And still they tell, beneath the starry shine,
Tales of strange joy, and griefs not mine, yet mine.

Far off the bells are hushed : my charmèd eyes
Unclose, and multitudinous soft dyes
Foretell the twilight. Down the dells is borne
Departing music, like the beetle's horn ;
And lamps of Elfland fade, and fade, and seem
A Winter's Tale, or a Midsummer Dream.

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